The Report of the Accreditation Visiting Team

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy 1441 South Campus Drive Cedar City, Utah 84720

June 13, 2007





Utah State Office of Education 250 East 500 South P.O. Box 144200 Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-4200

THE REPORT OF THE VISITING TEAM REVIEWING

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy 1441 South Campus Drive Cedar City, Utah 84720

June 13, 2007

UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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FOREWORD

The major purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate school growth and improvement so as to increase student achievement.

In these efforts, the school staff makes a comprehensive evaluation of the school's programs, operations, and results. The school determines how actual practices align to stated objectives and resulting outcomes. It is a three-phased evaluation: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators, and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, June 13 2007, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to increase student achievement.

The entire staff of Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the visiting team. The excellent leadership given by Head of School Jon Larsen and Academic Dean Stan Stewart is also commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for their desire for excellence at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy, and also for the professional attitude of all members of the group, which made it possible for them to see areas of weakness and strength and to suggest procedures for bringing about improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is even more important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more dramatically increase student achievement at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy.

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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MOUNTAIN SPRINGS PREPARATORY ACADEMY

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MOUNTAIN SPRINGS PREPARATORY ACADEMY

MISSION STATEMENT

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy is committed to integrating learning activities outside the classroom with learning activities in a traditional classroom in order to foster student success. By creating a Master Academic Personal Progress Plan (MAPP Plan) along with an encouraging and challenging learning environment, students are developed into confident communicators who can solve problems and strive to become independent life long learners. Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy is a safe, secure environment designed to aid students in transitioning to the next state of their life.

BELIEF STATEMENTS

- All students can learn and deserve to learn.
- All students should have the opportunity to learn a variety of subjects based on core standards.
- A student's self-concept impacts learning and a student feels loved will eagerly want to learn and will feel self-confident in doing so.
- Students will thrive in a supportive environment that emphasizes a student's strengths while challenging his/her to improve his/her weaknesses and work to his/her potential.
- All students can learn how to effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings orally, and in writing.
- Students are capable of using creative and critical thinking strategies to solve problems.
- Students can be taught to understand and exemplify the evolution of learning: from discovering learner to aware learner to respectful learner to master learner to excellent learner and into independent learner.
- Each student can be an independent learner by demonstrating accountability for his/her education.
- Through exposure to a variety of teaching methods, each student can identify his/her optimal learning style and learn to be successful in other learning environments

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Ted P. Lovato, Consultant, Utah State Office of Education, Visiting Team Chairperson

Joette Hayden, Cedar Breaks Academy, Private RTC

VISITING TEAM REPORT

MOUNTAIN SPRINGS PREPARATORY ACADEMY

CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL PROFILE

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy is a transitional boarding school that helps students graduating from either an RTC level of care or a wilderness program (if criteria are met) to prepare for their next step in life. Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy is not a therapeutic boarding school, but is more focused on students acclimating back into society. Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy utilizes a solution-focused model that allows students the opportunity to make choices (within a safe environment) and assess how much the students have internalized the skills they've learned. Rather than using behavioral consequences with the students, the Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy staff utilizes relationships as the agent for encouraging change.

School starts with early-morning physical education, and the school day ends at 3:20 p.m. Students attend classes four days a week and receive instruction in English, social studies, math, science, Spanish, fine arts, and physical education. One day each week is designated for labs, activities, and field study that require additional time and promote learning outside the classroom. The curriculum is based on the Utah Core Curriculum and is designed to be preparation for collegiate study. Southern Utah University offers the Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy student a wide variety of classes if the student is scholastically prepared.

The academy is one of four in Utah owned by CERTS (Certified Educational, Recreational & Therapeutic Schools), and does receive some students from the other schools as transitional students.

a) What significant findings were revealed by the school's analysis of its profile?

The Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy staff believes that most of the school's students have experienced periods in their lives when they made extremely poor choices; thus, having students gain or regain the knowledge that they are capable of is of great importance.

Students need to become better communicators using a variety of learned skills.

Students must be creative and critical thinkers, and have the tools to set goals and strive for all they are capable of. Staff members have learned they must work to help Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy students develop the aptitude to utilize the tools they have and are taught, and to do this both independently and collaboratively.

The staff wrote in the self-study: "We feel like the process of discussing, revising, and finalizing our action plan has helped us utilize and better understand the value

of these goals in our own lives, as well as in the lives of our students. We are confident that implementing these action steps will make us better teachers and administrators, and will afford our students the wonderful opportunity of acquiring traits and attributes that will benefit them for years to come."

b) What modifications to the school profile should the school consider for the future?

Desired results for student learning (DRSLs) should be a key component, and should be shared with all stakeholders within a reasonable amount of time. The Visiting Team felt that the DRSLs were not as well founded as they should have been. Stakeholders must be involved from the beginning stages.

Suggested Areas for Further Inquiry:

- Find ways to thoroughly educate all stakeholders with regard to the school's DRSLs.
- Investigate ways to provide more comprehensive special education services to students in need.
- Find ways to thoroughly assess students to assist in proper placement as they enter Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy.

CHAPTER 2: THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

a) To what extent has the school community engaged in a collaborative self-study process on behalf of students?

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy works with students from all areas of the United States. None of the enrolled students were residents of Utah.

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy still believes strongly, despite the great distances involved, in involving parents in the development of their children's growth. Parents visit the campus, are involved with focus groups, and are linked electronically to the school.

Parents have their opinions heard in surveys that look at the school's curriculum, instruction, assessment, beliefs, mission, and goals. Parents are instructed to assist students in maintaining all school assignments while they are on home visits.

The level of parent/guardian engagement is not ideal, but there is a strong effort being made by the school to keep parents/guardians involved.

b) To what extent does the school's self-study accurately reflect the school's current strengths and limitations?

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy's self-study (version 2.0) was informative and well documented, and presented in-depth material for review. The Visiting Team learned, from interviewing teachers, that the DRSLs were not presented to them long enough before the accreditation visit. This, of course, had a negative impact on the basis of the study, but the Visiting Team discovered a very strong teaching staff that has made adjustments.

The staff-to-student ratio is ideal, which assists greatly in meeting the diverse needs of the students; however, teachers still feel stretched to meet those needs. It is evident that is a problem when teachers must address multiple classes and/or subjects during a single class period. For example, the language arts teacher is licensed in English but has only background and experience (not a degree) in Spanish.

The school's facilities could be improved upon. Plans are in the works to construct more educational facilities and space. The academy is fortunate to have sufficient vacant land attached to the current property.

CHAPTER 3: INSTRUCTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy's desired results for student learning (DRSLs) are as follows:

- 1. A Confident Learner
- 2. An Effective Communicator
- 3 A Creative Thinker
- 4. An Independent Life Long Learner

The school staff has just begun to thoroughly delve into the working of the DRSLs and action plans. Observation of student achievement and educational research have been used to help determine the learning needs of students.

Shared Vision, Beliefs, Mission, and Goals:

a) To what extent did the school facilitate a collaborative process to build a shared vision for the school (mission) that defines a compelling purpose and direction for the school?

All school personnel are in full agreement concerning the purpose of the school and the direction it should take in working toward the achievement of its mission. The mission statement itself could benefit from a revision of its wording to more accurately and clearly reflect the mission envisioned by the school personnel.

b) To what extent has the school defined a set of beliefs that reflect the commitment of the administration and staff to support student achievement and success?

This has been effectively accomplished. The school beliefs accurately reflect the needs of the students that are served, and demonstrate commitment to the school's purpose of providing a quality educational experience to all.

c) To what extent do the school's mission and beliefs align to support the school's desired results for student learning (DRSLs)?

The mission and beliefs statements address key issues that are vital to the success of the students attending Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy. The expectations for student learning reflect meaningful and appropriately challenging goals. They all align well with the recommendations made by NSSE. Additional profile data and evaluation measures could be used annually to help support and document the alignment between the DRSLs and the school's mission and beliefs.

Curriculum Development:

a) To what extent does the staff work collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on clearly defined standards and the Utah Core Curriculum (with inclusion of the Utah Life Skills)?

The staff has done an excellent job of working collaboratively to ensure that the Utah Core Curriculum is clearly defined. A rigorous and challenging curriculum appears to be the standard for students at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy. Standards for appropriate learning are well defined in the school's "curriculum maps," and it was clearly evidenced in the classroom that teachers are knowledgeable of core standards. Utah Life Skills activities were evident, and ongoing teacher training would help ensure that this document is clearly understood by all members of the teaching staff.

b) To what extent does the teaching staff work collaboratively to support the development of a curriculum that focuses on the school's desired results for student learning?

The staff consistently works together to ensure that the Core Curriculum is taught in such a manner as to meet the needs of the school's unique, transitional student body. All faculty members agree that including the DRSLs and action plans as part of their teaching is a necessary step in ensuring the success of their students. They will continue to document their growth in this area.

Quality Instructional Design:

a) To what extent does the professional staff design and implement a variety of learning experiences that actively engage students?

The teaching staff at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy has shown tremendous creativity and innovation in providing students with a variety of learning experiences. One example of this creativity is demonstrated by the school's use of Knowledge Treks, which involve travel to a variety of places where hands-on learning of science, social studies, English and math all take place. In the classroom setting, both direct instruction and time for individual learning were observed. Students expressed appreciation with the one-to-one accessibility of the teachers and staff.

b) To what extent does the professional staff employ a variety of instructional strategies to ensure the needs of different learners are met?

Students have the opportunity to engage in several instructional strategies, which seems to be highly effective for most students. The need for special education services was evident, as teachers report that they regularly encounter students with learning disabilities or other academic concerns who would benefit from additional support in this area. It was not clearly defined how Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy works with IEPs (Individual Education Plans), but working to improve services in this area will only help to enhance the overall learning of all students.

c) To what extent do the professional staff and leadership provide additional opportunities which support student learning?

The students at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy are involved in several appropriate "additional opportunities" such as team sports, community service, university enrollment, and part time jobs in the community. Students report that these opportunities have been a positive, integral part of their education at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy. The Visiting Team commends the effort of the professional staff to provide such experiences for the students as they prepare to transition into society as a whole.

Quality Assessment Systems:

a) To what extent has the staff developed classroom or school-wide assessments based on clearly articulated expectations for student achievement?

A well-defined assessment method was not present at the time of the visit. Teachers report that some students enter the program with assessment data and some do not. Development of various forms of assessment was discussed, and school personnel are aware of this need. The Visiting Team recommends that upcoming developed assessments be fair, equitable, creative, and varied.

Assessment information for entering students should be articulated with teachers so they may better serve the students they instruct.

b) To what extent are assessments of student learning developed using methods that reflect the intended purpose and performance standards?

As stated above, assessment development is in progress. Informal classroom observation has been the main tool used to determine performance standards.

c) To what extent are assessments designed, developed, and used in a fair and equitable manner?

This is in progress; see above.

Leadership for School Improvement:

a) To what extent does the school leadership promote quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning?

The new principal at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy has played a strong role in creating a supportive, academic learning climate. It appears that the educational staff and leadership work closely to ensure student success and to solve problems as they arise.

b) To what extent does the school leadership employ effective decision making that is data-driven, research-based, and collaborative?

This is evident. The self-study will provide valuable information to the staff members as they collaborate, now and in the future, on ways to improve the instructional climate of the school. The collaboration is especially commendable.

c) To what extent does the school leadership monitor progress in student achievement and instructional effectiveness through a comprehensive assessment system and continuous reflection?

As noted, assessment measures are in the process of being improved upon.

d) To what extent does the school leadership provide skillful stewardship by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment?

All aspects of the organization were represented well to the Visiting Team. The leadership clearly ensures good stewardship. The overall workings of the school, from the admissions director to the medical staff to the office manager, appeared to be professional, efficient, and effective. A sufficient number of employees provide a safe environment every day.

e) To what extent does the school leadership make decisions related to the allocation and use of resources which align with the school goals, the achievement of the DRSLs, and school improvement efforts?

The current principal at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy is to be commended for his commitment to improvement and quality growth within the school. All school personnel voiced confidence that the owners of Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy will provide reasonable funding necessary to help with these school improvement efforts. Library resource materials and additional classroom space were discussed, and are in the process of being made available.

f) To what extent does the school leadership empower the school community and encourage commitment, participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility for student learning?

The school leadership demonstrates a strong collaborative effort among all personnel, and this team approach helps to foster shared responsibility. Commitment and participation were evident. It was also evident to the Visiting Team that a high degree of respect exists for the leadership team.

Community Building:

To what extent does the school foster community building and working relationships within the school?

Community building is an integral part of the school's program. Numerous examples of positive and productive community interaction were discussed by both students and teachers. Highlighting this aspect of Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy in the school's self study is recommended, as the full impact of the school's community-building effectiveness was only evident after the Visiting Team talked one-on-one with students and school personnel. The school is to be commended for the creative and varied forms in which its students are involved in local service and community endeavors. For example, one male student is a part-time ski instructor at the local ski resort.

b) To what extent does the school extend the school community through collaborative networks that support student learning?

As noted above, the school participates in community projects and service learning, which is an integral part of the program. Some Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy students are academically involved with the local university and plan to stay on to pursue a college degree.

Culture of Continuous Improvement and Learning:

a) To what extent does the school build skills and the capacity for improvement through comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs focused on the school's goals for improvement?

This has taken place both within the school's own community and with local schools that have mentored teachers at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy. Quarterly in-house professional development has taken place, and all school personnel report this to be an important tool in working toward the school's goals for improvement. The Visiting Team encourages that further workshops on accreditation be attended as needed by school personnel, as some are relatively new to the teaching field and to accreditation needs in particular.

b) To what extent does the school create conditions that support productive change and continuous improvement?

The school is supportive of ongoing improvement. All personnel expressed the continual desire to grow, learn, and create a safe and healthy learning environment for all students attending Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy. It is interesting to note that the staff is young and energetic.

CHAPTER 4: NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION OF ACCREDITED SCHOOLS (NAAS) STANDARDS I-XI

Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy is in compliance with all NAAS standards for accreditation. Over the years, the school has worked diligently to maintain the accreditation standards as outlined by the NAAS and the Utah State Office of Education. The school's curriculum is aligned with the Utah State Core Curriculum. All professional educators are properly licensed and endorsed for their particular assignments, in accordance with Utah state requirements. The school is financially viable and ethical in its business practices. Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy has created and maintained a culture of continuous improvement that supports student achievement.

CHAPTER 5: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS – ACTION PLAN

a) To what extent is the school-wide action plan adequate in addressing the critical areas for follow-up?

The action plan, developed over a year-long process of collaboration, is solid and will form a strong basis for future academic growth at Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy. As noted elsewhere in this report, DRSLs need to be

known by all stakeholders.

Constant monitoring of the plan will be done by stakeholders. DRSLs must receive more in-depth development that involves **all** stakeholders.

Focus groups should be revisited with parents/guardians at the Spring Parent Weekend to assure ownership by that important group.

- b) To what extent is there sufficient commitment to the action plan, school-wide and system-wide?
 - There seems to be a strong, school-wide commitment to the action plan, and a reasonable time-line has been developed. It is emphasized again, however, that the in-depth development and ownership of the DRSLs needs more attention.
- c) How sound does the follow-up process that the school intends to use for monitoring the accomplishments of the school-wide action plan appear to be?

The school staff has developed eleven (11) means by which to evaluate the school action plan. It is recommended by the Visiting Team that the NSSE format be utilized in the process of evaluation.

CHAPTER 6: MAJOR COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Commendations:

- The Visiting Team commends Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy for its efforts on the self-study, especially version 2.0. It is in-depth, informative, and well organized, and should continue to be a valuable tool for future growth.
- The Visiting Team commends the faculty of Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy for utilizing a variety of instructional strategies to ensure that the needs of the diverse learners at the school will be met.
- The Visiting Team commends Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy for the outstanding work done by the teachers in fostering positive student/teacher relationships based on a strong sense of trust.
- The Visiting Team commends the Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy staff for working collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on standards defined in the Utah Core Curriculum. The staff has also gone beyond the core requirements in providing learning opportunities for students, and in meeting the transitional needs of students with regard to their individual curriculum growth.

- The Visiting Team commends the leadership of Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy for committing to a low teacher-to-student ratio.
- The Visiting Team commends Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy for the transitional model it has developed, which is based on trust, positive decision making, and personal accountability by the individual student. Because of this, students are better prepared to meet the societal challenges which await them as they exit Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy.
- The Visiting Team commends the Academic Dean for fostering a positive learning environment for teachers and students alike. Teachers feel a strong sense of support for their own individual academic freedom.
- The Visiting Team commends Mountain Springs Preparatory Academy for developing positive community-building efforts, and for establishing strong working relationships with the local school district, university, and business community.

Recommendations:

- The Visiting Team recommends that development of the desired results for student learning (DRSLs) be brought more in line with school goals and school improvement efforts. This must be accomplished by expanding the knowledge of DRSLs to all key stakeholders. The Visiting Team is concerned that insufficient time has gone into the established role that DRSLs play in the accreditation process.
- The Visiting Team recommends to the leadership of Mountain Springs
 Preparatory Academy that plans for a new education facility come to fruition and
 include adequate library, technology, and science laboratory facilities.
- The Visiting Team recommends the teacher-to-student ratio not exceed six to one, in order to maintain the unique environment and educational program that currently exists at the school.
- The Visiting Team recommends the establishment of a comprehensive and consistent assessment tool for entering students, and further recommends that it be used to monitor students' progression throughout their stay at the school.
- The Visiting Team recommends that the staff investigate ways to provide more comprehensive special education services to those students who are in need.
- The Visiting Team recommends that specific individuals be named and listed as the person(s) responsible for leading the various action plans.